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HISTORIC RED BANKS  
PRIMITIVE BAPTIST  
CHURCH

GREENVILLE BANKS, JR.



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*Greenville Banks, Jr.*

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## HISTORIC RED BANKS PRIMITIVE BAPTIST CHURCH

The Primitive Baptists were organized in 1689 by the English General Baptists and adopted a document called the London Articles of Faith in which the absolute sovereignty of God is established. The denomination continues to subscribe to these Articles today.

The persecution of the Primitive Baptists started almost immediately. Because they kept to themselves, looked after their own, lived very plainly and simply, and had neither creeds nor pageantry in their worship services, they were shunned by their contemporaries and called names such as "Separatists" or "the Simple Ones." As many English people left their native land for the promise of the freedom of worship, the Primitive Baptists were among the earliest to depart for Colonial America. They settled all along the east coast with large settlements in Pennsylvania and South Carolina, which eventually evolved into two associations—Philadelphia and Charleston.

In the spring of 1758, a group of farmers in what is now Pitt County (Beaufort County at the time; Pitt County originated in 1760) sent letters to the Philadelphia Association asking for assistance in organizing a congregation of the Primitive Baptist faith. The Philadelphia Association sent two elders (the name given to their preachers) to the area; and, by November of the same year, a meeting house had been constructed on the north side of the Tar River in the area known today as the Speir Plantation. The building was small and the congregation soon outgrew it.

A son of Colonel John Hardee of Revolutionary War fame owned considerable acreage on the south side of the river and he offered the present site for a meeting house. The congregation accepted his offer, and a building 60 feet by 50 feet was constructed. This meeting house was in use when the War Between the States began. A group of Federalist troops came, camped on the grounds, and made the meeting house their headquarters. When the troops moved out, they set fire to the building, leaving the congregation without

a meeting house until some time after the end of the war when a new house of worship—thirty feet by forty feet—was built on or near the same spot as the first.

Again, history repeated itself and the congregation outgrew the space. The second meeting house on the site was dismantled. With the salvaged lumber and additional materials, which were purchased at a cost of \$130, the present building as it now stands was completed in 1893.

The structure of five-bay elevations on either side, three-bay elevations on the back and two front doors was typical of Primitive Baptist architecture in eastern North Carolina. Similar buildings exist in Williamston and Bear Grass. The two front doors had a purpose—the men and boys over 12 years old entered on the right and sat on the right side, while the ladies, girls, and boys under 12 entered on the left and sat on the left.

Originally, louvered shutters were on the windows and a flue top went through the wood-shingled roof. Some of the original hardware for the shutters was still in place when the Pitt County Historical Society, Inc., became owners of the property, but no sign of shutters remained. The shutters on the church today were handcrafted in New England. The top of the flue was knocked down when a tin roof was placed on the church, probably in the 1940's or 1950's. The flue from the roof to the ceiling still remains in the attic.

The inside of the church is very much like it was in 1893—beaded ceiling on the walls, board and batting overhead, and the original plank pews are still in use. The original pulpit furniture is no longer available except for the communion table. It is very primitive—made of extremely wide boards with the original hardware. The original pot-bellied stove is gone but a stove of the same vintage stands in its place today.

The Primitive Baptist faith is an elder/deacon organization. The elders are the preachers and have no formal training. They are



Self-taught and led by God. After being examined by the congregation and hearing why they feel they should be an elder, the individual is licensed by the church. The elder must have a vocation to support himself and his family because he does not get a salary from the congregation.

The deacons care for and look after the needs of the families of the congregation as well as maintain the meeting house. There is little need for money in the Primitive Baptist Church so there are no offerings taken—hence, no offering plates. If you want to make a free-will offering, you place it on the communion table before worship services started or at the conclusion. The treasurer of the congregation collects any offerings from the table.

The Primitive Baptist faith is very simple. Primitive Baptists believe in God who is all-knowing and all-powerful and use the scriptures of the King James Bible. There is a real belief in God's complete control or predestination—what is to be will be because it pre-ordained by God.

No musical instruments are used in the meeting house. Hymn books without musical notes are used. Each congregation has a song leader and congregations don't always use the same tune for the same words; so, if you are visiting with a congregation, you must wait to see if the hymn is being sung to a familiar tune before you join in singing.

Communion is served from a common cup with home-made grape juice and unleavened bread made by one of the ladies of the congregation. The washing of feet as a sign of true humility is practiced, and the Pitt County Historical Society, Inc., has one of the cups used in this ritual on display in the church.

There is no Sunday school and no work with children. Bible teaching to the children is done in the home. Adults join the church by addressing the congregation declaring their belief in God and many never officially join for the fear of having to speak to the congregation of their faith. Baptism by immersion follows.

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Years ago, dinner on the grounds became a tradition because churchgoers never knew how long worship would last because it was traditional for every elder present to be given the opportunity to preach. Since elders were itinerant and services were held once a month in the typical congregation, there were several sermons. At some point, there would be a break during which the families spread tablecloths on the ground, opened picnic baskets, and enjoyed a middle-of-the-day meal. Upon completion of the meal, worship services resumed.

In the early 1800's a division occurred at Red Banks. There were members of the congregation who wanted to start a Sunday school, bring a musical instrument, a piano, into the church, and start some missionary work. After a great deal of discussion, no compromise could be reached so the group wanting to depart from tradition left the fellowship and formed the Greenville Baptist Church which later became the Memorial Baptist Church. The year was 1827. From the Memorial Church, Immanuel, Arlington Boulevard, and Oakmont Churches have been organized; therefore, all Southern Baptists in Greenville have roots in the Primitive Baptist faith.

In May of 2000, the Red Banks Primitive Baptist Church was deeded to the Pitt County Historical Society, Inc., by the five remaining members of the congregation: Claude Fornes and his wife, Eula Lee, along with Clarice and Howard Mills (brother of Eula Lee Fornes), and Alma Hardee Davis transferred the title of the property with the understanding that only Primitive Baptist worship services would be held in the meeting house. It can be used for weddings, funerals, meetings, family reunions, and other community activities approved by the Pitt County Historical Society Board of Directors. Historic Red Banks Primitive Baptist Church was put on the National Register of Historic Places in 2002.

Additional properties have been added to the original deed. The property facing 14th Street was purchased in 2001 with a grant from the James J. and Mamie Richardson Perkins Trust. In 2002 the cemetery bordered by Firetower Road was deeded to the

Society by Bill Williams and his daughter, Gail Williams Joyner. Bill Williams' wife, Edith Forrest Williams, whose family had originally owned the property, had promised to give the property to the Society; however, she died before this was accomplished. Mr. Williams and Mrs. Joyner complied with her wishes.

The Primitive Baptists have been a part of the heritage and culture of eastern North Carolina for many years, and the Pitt County Historical Society, Inc., is pleased to have a part in the restoration and preservation of "the little white church on Firetower Road" as it is often called.

Sources: Article written by Mitchell Moore, 1985; church history by Sylvester Hassell, published in 1886; oral history as told by Claude and Eula Lee Fornes.  
—Greenville Banks, Jr.

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